THE VALUE OF UNHAPPINESS

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THERE has recently been a correspondence in *The Times Educational Supplement* entitled "The Value of Unhappiness." It was started on February 8th by Dr. Ralph Lynn of Exeter University with the words: "The idea that school children ought to be happy is comparatively new, although probably most people nowadays would accept it. However, a great deal of educational discussion to-day not only takes this for granted but also rests on a particular theory of what happiness is. The theory holds that school children will be made happy if they are freed from feelings of tension and anxiety."

Lynn then goes on to question this doctrine. Tension and anxiety are bound to arise sometimes in any competitive system of schooling, but here and now they arise especially over the 11-plus examination that determines which of the children are to go on into the grammar schools. It is therefore argued by some people that anxiety, and therefore unhappiness, should be eliminated by abolishing this examination, and pushed to its logical conclusion, this means abolishing the grammar schools. If then the doctrine is accepted that happiness in childhood is one of the main things in life, and if happiness is only to be attained by eliminating all tension, we shall be forced to adopt a flat uniform type of education, which will in consequence of necessity be at a low intellectual level.

Lynn points out that the principle that happiness should be the main thing at school is quite a new idea. In the eighteenth century Dr. Johnson attributed his successful mastery of Latin to the floggings he had received, which do not seem to have made him notably unhappy. Though in the nineteenth century the stick tended to be replaced by the competitive weekly mark-list, it was taken for granted that this competition was an important part of education. It is only rather recently, under the influence of psychological theory—as Lynn maintains, of a false reading of Freudian doctrine—that it has come to be held that these anxieties will inevitably produce frustrations with all the complications of the psychoses so dear to the heart of the psychiatrist. He reasons that to take this line is to give up the stimuli which are beneficial for the great majority, in order to avoid the possible ill effects they may have on a few of the weaker members.

There were a considerable number of letters answering this challenge. Though each writer naturally took an individual point of view, they practically all assumed the fashionable opinion that Lynn was questioning. To a layman the most curious, and really rather dangerous, feature of these letters is that the writers were all interested to a quite predominating extent in the mental states of the pupils at the bottom of the class; there was hardly a reference to the need for providing stimulus to the pupils near the top, who after all are much more important to the future of the country.

This preoccupation with the weaker members is part of the present menacing trend of political thought which insists on absolute equality—not, be it noted, equality of opportunity, which is almost the exact opposite and which was fairly well achieved under the old system. As a cynic once put it, equality seems to be interpreted as meaning that no one is to work harder than the laziest, or to be wiser than the stupidest, or happier than the most miserable. For example one letter urged as an argument against the marks system that in fact the highest marks tended to go to the ablest boy, and this was unfair because he often needed to put much less effort into his work than his less gifted fellows. The inference would seem to be that the top boy ought to be penalized rather than rewarded, because

he could not help doing better than his fellows.

Other writers, indeed the majority, insisted that the most important thing in the school system is never to produce anxiety. Some attempted a distinction between unhealthy anxiety and healthy tension, but it is obviously hard to draw this line, and the letters give the impression that their writers are so strongly concerned not to cause the anxiety in their pupils that they will avoid the danger of it by reducing the temperature of the tension almost to zero. The correspondence closed on March 8th with a reply from Dr. Lynn, which answered some of the specific points raised, but broadly speaking repeated his original views unchanged.

It is dangerous for one who has had no practical experience in school-teaching to express opinions on this subject, but to me it seems that Dr. Lynn has very much the best of the argument. It is all too easy to see a pupil being made unhappy by anxiety, and to regard the anxiety as a form of torture to be removed at any cost, but it is surely sentimentally unrealistic. It must be recognised that children are not always good, so that punishment is sometimes indispensable, and the punishment will surely make them unhappy—is not that its aim? When a boy is persistently near the bottom of the class, it may be due either to stupidity or to laziness. A discriminating schoolmaster will usually be able to distinguish which it is, and surely he is quite right to inflict unhappiness on the lazy ones.

My own school experience is now rather a long time ago, but I doubt if the characteristics of the human boy have changed very much in the interval. It is true that there was not the 11-plus examination in those days, but there was fierce competition for scholarships, and with the much smaller endowments of education, the winning of a scholarship could play just as great a part in the determination of a whole life's career. In my school there were certainly boys who were persistently near the bottom of the class, but I cannot recall that it seemed to make them particularly unhappy. They had never been much higher and were used to it, just as I was used to being only rather mediocre at games and was not made particularly unhappy by that. Indeed this matter of games makes a good parallel, for it is a stronger interest for many boys than is their work, and it may cause a boy just as much anxiety to know whether he will get into the eleven, as whether he will pass the 11-plus examination. Even if it were desirable to avoid competition among schoolboys, there are so many parts of the school life in which competition is inevitable, that no great difference would be made by the removal of one cause of it, and that one cause mainly affecting the less important portions of the school population.

Is not the doctrine of the absolute importance of happiness at school at least partly due to confused thinking? The purpose of education is surely to fit people for adult life, and is not the best way of doing this to submit them by gradual degrees to the germs of the conditions they will be meeting in later life, which will certainly often involve tensions and anxieties and stresses. We want of course to make people reasonably happy in later life, but it is quite absurd to think that for this they can be taught happiness at school in the way they can be taught arithmetic. Indeed it might be argued that the effect is sometimes quite the opposite, for I know certain schools which give many of their pupils the feeling that no matter how they fare in later life they will never have so wonderful a time as they did at school. Surely it cannot be regarded as a really good education to give the belief that no matter what happens the adult future can never be so great an experience as the adolescent past.

This is not the place for a general disquisition on what happiness consists in, and no doubt there would be many different, even opposing, opinions about it. But for a good many people it is not so much a condition as a change of condition; their happiest times are when they compare the good present with the bad past, and conversely their unhappiest times are when they compare past good fortune with present misfortune. If that is so, it should

alter the doctrine that the chief duty of a teacher is to make his charges happy. Their immediate happiness may be a good in itself, but it is no more than that, and he will give a greater contribution to the total sum of human happiness by attending chiefly, using whatever stimulus is needed, whether it is pleasant or the reverse, to fitting them for success in later life. It is such considerations as these that have made me agree warmly with the spirit of Dr. Lynn's letter.